

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Sept 17-21, 2012
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Rhetoric is the art of effective speaking or writing by using metaphors, puns, plays on words, repetition of words or phrases and other properties of language to convince, persuade or inspire. Memorable speeches, for example Martin Luther King's "*I Have a Dream*" speech, are effective and memorable because he was a master of rhetoric.

On the other hand, given how signed languages are constructed rhetoric doesn't really exist in signed communication. True or False

Answer "False" – Most DCQW readers are likely to answer "false." At least I hope that is the case. But can you give examples of rhetoric in signed language?

This question came to me recently when I was observing students in a senior class meeting conduct the election of officers. Students nominated for each office stood in turn before their classmates to present reasons why they were seeking a particular office. One student, running for class president came to the front and wrote the following on the whiteboard. "Nothing is impossible because impossible can be spelled "I'm possible!" He then turned to his classmates and translated this message into ASL. The English sentence is an example of rhetoric. The clever transformation of the word "impossible" sends a persuasive message about why students should vote for him. One thinks for example, "If he is our leader we will have a great senior year in school." Or, "He won't let anything stop him."

Then this student proceeded to elaborate on the things he would do as president of the class. In the course of his short speech he also included a very effective play on signs that is an excellent example of rhetoric in ASL. He wanted to emphasize teamwork and action versus complaining. He used a very clever and creative combination of signs. He signed COMPLAIN+++. While making the sign that means complaining he used his left hand to grab onto the sign stopping its movement. The handshake of his left hand in grabbing his right hand is a C-handshape. The right hand in the sign "COMPLAIN" is a C-handshape. His left hand now holding on to his right hand moved it in a slow and deliberate manner to point down in front of him. He released his left hand and placed it front of him and moved both of them back and forth to communicate the idea of "ACTION." In essence with this clever play on signs he was saying. "Turn complaints into action."

Or “I won’t tolerate complaining about the impossible. I will want to do something about it.” This was clearly an example of the effective use of signs to convince, persuade or inspire. It was an example of rhetoric in ASL.

This was also an example of bilingualism. The student effectively used both English and ASL to persuade his audience. At WSD we practice an ASL-English bilingual approach. We began our bilingual approach five years ago. This student has been a student at our school during this entire process. His hearing father learned and has used sign language in the home with this student since an early age. Clearly this shows the effects of a bilingual approach and the early and consistent use of sign language in the home. It was very inspiring for me to witness this and I hope this DCQW will inspire you as well.

By the way, the student was voted overwhelmingly to the office of senior class president.

Note that

Deaf Culture Questions of the Week are archived at: <http://www.wsd.wa.gov>